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Central Intelligence Agency



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## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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**"IMPROVING SOVIET-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONS: A New Phase in the Moscow-  
Beijing-P'yongyang Triangle"**Summary

Recent Soviet actions toward North Korea appear to be part of a larger effort to improve the USSR's strategic position in Northeast Asia. Both Moscow and P'yongyang have misgivings over the "strategic dialogue" between the US and the PRC. China's willingness to deal more openly with South Korea presumably also has evoked concern in P'yongyang, and Moscow is trying to exploit North Korea's sense of isolation in the region. The Soviet delivery of advanced fighter aircraft may be an effort to buy into future political discussions on the peninsula and to counter closer ties between the US, China, Japan, and South Korea. The Soviets could link future deliveries to access to North Korean air and naval facilities as well as Soviet-North Korean cooperation in the Third World. [redacted]

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China's reaction to improved Soviet-North Korean relations has been circumspect so far, but would be more pronounced if the Soviets gain access to North Korean facilities. A continuing Soviet presence in the North would affect the military balance and link the peninsula more directly to the larger US-Soviet confrontation in the region.

This memorandum was prepared by Mel Goodman of the Office of Soviet Analysis. It was coordinated with the Office of East Asian Analysis. Information as of 21 June 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries may be addressed to Mel Goodman, SOVA, [redacted]

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Recent improvements in Soviet-North Korean relations could change the strategic environment in Northeast Asia and have implications for the security calculations of key states in the region. Since late last year, the Soviets have



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- Delivered six MIG-23 fighter aircraft to North Korea [redacted]
- Agreed to send a naval squadron to North Korea for ceremonies marking the 40th anniversary of liberation from Japan. [redacted]

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[redacted] the MIG deliveries may be the first round of a series of Soviet deliveries that will total 35 to 40 MIG-23 Floggers over the next year or two. Such deliveries would provide P'yongyang with a Flogger regiment in place as the United States begins deliveries of F-16s to South Korea in February 1986. [redacted]

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The Soviets in recent years have been cautious about what they have provided to North Korea, holding back since 1973 on items such as modern aircraft and air defense systems that they have supplied to other countries. On the other hand, Moscow has kept its hand in by supplying communications and intelligence collection equipment, air surveillance radars, and the manufacturing technology for somewhat dated tanks, antitank and surface-to-air missiles, and fire control radars. [redacted]

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The delivery of 40 MIG-23s will aid P'yongyang in countering the South's growing qualitative edge in air power. Combined with domestic production of less-capable fighters--probably F-7s--which is expected to begin soon in North Korea, the delivery will allow the North to keep pace with planned gains in the South through the acquisition of F-16s and the continued coproduction of F-5Es.\* [redacted]

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### The Korean Perspective

P'yongyang used Kim's visit to the USSR and Eastern Europe last year to signal interest in improving relations with the USSR. A greater community of views on foreign policy issues was evident during Kim's trip than had been evident in Soviet-Korean relations since the 1960s. The Koreans pointed to a "full consensus on all the problems discussed," and North Korean positions on Mongolia and Kampuchea tilted toward the Soviet view in the wake of Kim's visit. The visit followed Chinese party leader Hu Yaobang's trip to North Korea, which was marked by signs of strain in Sino-Korean relations. P'yongyang's recent treatment of the anniversaries of its defense treaties with Moscow and Beijing also indicated an improvement in relations with the USSR and a cooling with China. Most recently, North Korea gave unusually high-level attention to the first anniversary of Kim's visit to the USSR, including Kim's attendance at an unusual anniversary banquet at the Soviet Embassy in P'yongyang. (Such an event did not follow Kim's trips to the PRC in 1975 or 1982.) [redacted]

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In retrospect, Kim's trip to Moscow appears to have been a turning point in Soviet-North Korean relations and possibly in North Korean foreign policy in general. The North Korean leader seems to have found the Gorbachev regime a more reliable ally--particularly with regards to the U.S. This was especially important to P'yongyang as it watched its other major ally--China--pursue improved relations with the U.S. and even nod in the direction of South Korea. The North Koreans' sense of growing isolation as China went its own way would have been compounded by the US reassertion of security ties to South Korea and moves to beef up US military forces in the region. That Kim Il-song is feeling more confident as relations with Moscow improve is suggested by

\* North Korea will likely receive the MIG-23ML (Flogger G), which is a generation behind both the capabilities and performance of the F-16, which is more maneuverable aircraft and has a superior target tracking capability. [redacted]

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P'yongyang's more active foreign policy--including the initiation of a direct dialogue with Seoul and renewed efforts to engage the US in direct talks. [redacted]

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### The Soviet Perspective

Since 1969, the Soviets made no serious attempts to improve relations with P'yongyang. The Soviets recognized that the North Korean tilt in the direction of Beijing had historic and cultural roots and therefore would be difficult to counter. At the same time, Moscow believed that any North Korean move in the direction of the USSR could only be tactical and opportunistic. During the late 1960s, when Moscow had made a decision to improve relations with the United States, the Soviet leadership was particularly leery about being identified with Kim's adventurism against Washington and, as a result, gave no support to P'yongyang in the wake of the Pueblo seizure in 1968 or the downing of the EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in 1969. (The Soviets, moreover, condemned the North Koreans in 1976, when they murdered two U.S. army officers at Panmunjon). [redacted]

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Since Brezhnev's death in 1982, however, the Soviets clearly have been testing the waters and looking for counters to closer ties between the US, China, Japan, and South Korea in order to correct their own isolation in the region. The adverse Asian reaction to the KAL shootdown in September 1983 led the Soviets to woo the North Koreans. In the following month, for example, Moscow absolved P'yongyang of any blame for its attack on the South Korean political leadership in Burma in 1983 and renewed an invitation to Kim Il-song to visit Moscow at some unspecified time. Soviet accounts of the subsequent talks between premiers and foreign ministers of the two sides emphasized that their mutual interest in strengthening "international security" had created a "reliable basis for their mutual cooperation." Last year's Soviet treatment of the USSR-North Korean defense treaty also was warmer than usual and focused on the theme of Soviet economic assistance to P'yongyang. [redacted]

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The Soviet willingness to provide MIG-23 fighter aircraft to P'yongyang also signals that Moscow is determined not to be frozen out of broader political discussions of the Korean question and that the Korean peninsula may become less isolated from the larger strategic confrontation between the US and the USSR in East Asia. The Soviets are countering Japan's willingness to accept F-16s at Misawa as well as the general augmentation of the US military position in the region. The Flogger deliveries also indicate that Moscow has dropped previous reservations about the risk of both military technology being transferred from North Korea to China and P'yongyang's possible military adventurism against the South.

Moscow may attempt to use the current deliveries of Floggers as well as the possible future delivery of anti-tank guided missiles and surface-to-air

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missiles to persuade P'yongyang to allow Soviet access to North Korean air and naval facilities on either the Yellow Sea or the Sea of Japan. At the present time, however, we do not believe that P'yongyang will allow any foreign basing rights. [REDACTED]

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### China's Perspective

North Korea's differences with China are rooted in Beijing's fundamental policy of economic modernization and its opening to the West. As China's stake in good relations with the US, Japan and even South Korea grows, it becomes a less reliable ally in the eyes of the North. The Chinese do not want to see North Korea drift into a Soviet orbit, but they are unprepared to reverse course in order to satisfy the North. [REDACTED]

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In an effort to change P'yongyang's view, Beijing has energized its diplomacy. The Chinese are:

- Encouraging direct contacts between the North and South, and between the North and the US, to reduce tensions on the peninsula.
- Showing the North the merits of opening to the outside world and reforming its economy.
- Cultivating Northern leaders through stepped up exchanges of visitors. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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### Implications

The recent improvement in Soviet-North Korean geopolitical and military relations is merely the latest in a series of steps that have enhanced Moscow's strategic position in Northeast Asia. Over the past several years, the Soviets have increased their force posture in Asia without drawing down forces deployed in other military theaters, established an independent theater command for the region, built up their forces in the Northern Territories and enhanced their power projection capabilities at Cam Ranh Bay, and--as a result--signaled a determination not to yield to Chinese and Japanese territorial grievances against the USSR. The Soviets are now in a stronger

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position to challenge the forward deployment of US military power in the region, particularly the introduction of the Tomahawk cruise missile and the increased number of U.S. fighter aircraft. [REDACTED]

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Any increase in the Soviet-American strategic competition in the region could have a spillover effect in Beijing and Tokyo where there is interest in limiting superpower tensions in Northeast Asia. Both China and Japan have become increasingly concerned with Soviet naval, air, and ground force deployments in the region--particularly the increase in SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers--but both states also must contend with key political factions that question the acceptable extent of military cooperation with the United States as a counter to the USSR. Conversely, the Soviets presumably realize that a possible Sino-Japanese response to the closer military ties between the USSR and North Korea could be an enhanced strategic dialogue between the US, China, and Japan as well as a possible worsening in both Sino-Soviet and Japanese-Soviet relations. [REDACTED]

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The greatest risk that would accompany any serious strengthening of Soviet-North Korean military ties would be a worsening of North-South Korean relations, which have been precarious in the best of times. The Soviets may calculate--as we do--that the weapons they are delivering will not upset the military balance on the peninsula. But we cannot be certain where improved military relations will stop, and the provisions of more advanced military systems ultimately could contribute to destabilization--particularly over the next few years when both North and South Korea are expected to experience leadership successions. [REDACTED]

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Outside of the peninsula, we cannot rule out the possibility of greater coordination of activities in the third world in cases where such actions both promote North Korean interests and run minimal risks of casting P'yongyang in the light of a Soviet client. Seeking to be named the host of the 1986 Nonaligned summit, North Korea will be particularly concerned over the near-term to protect its independent image. Unlike many Third World countries, moreover, the North Koreans provide very competent assistance. P'yongyang often has been willing to get involved in situations where the Soviets have been somewhat more cautious; for example, North Korea is currently the major supplier of military equipment to Iran whereas the USSR is trying to limit such aid. [REDACTED]

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Chinese officials generally have attempted to appear calm about increased North Korean dealings with the USSR, in part because Beijing has a weak basis for complaint when it is itself improving ties to the Soviets. Nonetheless, the pattern of Chinese official visits, including General Secretary Hu Yaobang's visit North Korea last spring, just before Kim's visit to the USSR, suggests high level concern. [REDACTED]

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[redacted]

We doubt that the current degree of military cooperation between the DPRK and the USSR will lead to any distinct shift in Chinese policy. Beijing is likely to continue to press the US and Japan to initiate contacts with the North, especially in the form of US-North-South tripartite talks. The Chinese will also promote the North-South Korean bilateral economic and political talks in an effort to reduce tensions on the peninsula. China could also attempt to encourage the view that the US is to blame for improved North Korean-Soviet ties, arguing that US plans to transfer F-16s and other military technologies to South Korea is upsetting the balance of power on the peninsula. [redacted]

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Beijing will increase its own efforts to court P'yongyang, work still harder to cultivate the Northern leadership, especially Kim's designated successor, Kim Chong-il. We expect more Chinese-initiated high level discussions and greater efforts by the Chinese to persuade North Korea of the merits of China's modernization model, with all it implies for opening to the West and playing down tensions. China may also try to build some leverage in P'yongyang by interceding again with the US on issues such as reducing the annual Team Spirit exercises. [redacted]

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We believe the Chinese will continue their slow expansion of ties with the South Koreans, occasionally deferring to the North's objections, but in the long run pursuing increased trade with Seoul. The Chinese are unlikely to accede to North Korean requests for high profile demonstrations of solidarity--such as boycotting the Seoul Olympics--that cut against these broader Chinese interests. [redacted]

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### The Longer Term

In time, it is possible that military cooperation between the USSR and the DPRK could include regular Soviet access to North Korean air and naval facilities. If so, Beijing's reaction is likely to be pronounced. The Chinese will be pulled in two directions. On the one hand, they will probably press the United States to offer P'yongyang some concession to slow the rapprochement with Moscow, and to warn the Soviets directly against further moves. In this process, Beijing may want to reduce the visibility of its military contacts with the US to assuage P'yongyang. On the other hand, fearing another loss along its borders comparable to Vietnam's drift toward the Soviets, the Chinese could escalate their rhetoric toward the North and threaten sanctions in the limited areas where China has economic and other kinds of influence with P'yongyang. [redacted]

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